

How Playing With Failure Led Students to Archival Exploration

An assignment created in the Teaching with Primary Sources workshop proved that playing with failure can be fruitful, fascinating, and fun

Odette England | March 30th, 2022



Composite image of items Odette England discovered in searching the Archives' website. TOP L: Joan Semmel. Source photograph for Joan Semmel's painting *Cross-over*, circa 1979. Joan Semmel papers, 1949-2013. R: Brief in behalf of Petitioner-Respondent Kate Rothko, 1972 November 3. Gustave Harrow legal records relating to the Estate of Mark Rothko, 1957-1986. BOTTOM L: George Catlin. A variety of specimens of steatite from the Red Pipestone Quarry, 1836. George Catlin papers, undated. R: Joseph Cornell silver foil carpet rubbings, 1946 October. Joseph Cornell papers, 1804-1986. All Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

There are many words starting with the letter *F* that imply goodness. Fun! Fabulous! Frisky! Then there are f-words that fall short. Faulty. Fracture. Fever. One of the most frightening f-words of all is *failure*. It hails from the Old French *failir*, which means non-occurrence, lacking, to not succeed. Success, meanwhile, from the Latin *successus*, means a good result, a happy outcome.

Failure and success, opposites that attract and repel. Neither friends nor foes, they occupy the same galaxy as good and evil. That's how it can feel when we're reaching for success and instead get the short end of the f-stick. We should also make room the letter *E* because failure is linked to *expectations*. You know that feeling; when things don't go as planned, or we set goals that don't quite come to fruition.

We all fail, more often than we admit. Some failures happen in private, others in public. Most of us learn from failure, yet what, how, and when we learn is different. And failure isn't always the best teacher. We're patted on the back and told not to worry: It's a learning opportunity! It's character building! It'll make you stronger! It can be hard to remember that failure isn't built into our DNA. Oprah Winfrey once said, "It's life trying to move us into another direction."

But what if failure *is* success, just wearing a different outfit? What if failure is fanciful? Can't we untether success from failure all together, liberate it from being a negative term? Isn't it time we evolve the definition of failure?

I first conceptualized "Failed It"—a course about contemporary art and failure—while teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2019. I took inspiration from the photographer Erik Kessels's book *Failed It: How to Turn Mistakes Into Ideas and Other Advice for Successfully Screwing Up*; Lisa Le Feuvre's edited volume *Failure*; and Jerry Saltz's "My Life as a Failed Artist" in which he writes that the reason Jeff Koons's work is so great owes to "that willingness to fail so flamboyantly." I was eager for a course that finally asked out loud: What does it mean to fail, and how can the risk of failure inspire us?

"Failed It" was designed as a graduate-level elective seminar open to all majors. The first group comprised twelve students. Three weeks into the semester, the COVID-19 pandemic became a real-life example of living with failure. I tried to rewrite the course to accommodate the virus; it was a futile exercise. Instead, I embraced through uncertainty and instability (more than effective pedagogy) the topic at hand. We confronted failure in real time. A variety of guest speakers shared their personal experiences of flops and fiascos. Despite challenges and amusements, it was one of the liveliest and most motivating courses I've taught. We saw, felt, and shared failure while it was occurring.

Moving to Amherst College in 2020, I took lessons from that first iteration of "Failed It" to consider how failure could be more than a tool, ingredient, or mindset. I continued to advocate for running towards failure, but with a healthy dose of skepticism about the resources we as artists, historians, and researchers rely on. Museums, archives, and library collections, for example, are hotbeds of failure. Ever listen to a recording of an oral history interview, then consider who authored the questions, and with what biases built-in? This was one of the many debates we had in class listening to oral histories from the Archives of American Art.

During chats with research librarian friends, we shared our love for primary sources. In particular, how they help students relate in more subjective and intimate ways to events of the past and are also incomplete morsels of history that students can only investigate further by unearthing new pieces of evidence. It was these phrases “incomplete morsels of history” and “new pieces of evidence” that piqued my interest.

My extended phase of course revision and reflection continued. I attended the VII Photo Agency’s lecture series Photographers and Archives. In the session “Accessing the Archive,” Curators Alison Nordstrom and Hilary Roberts engaged in dialogue on issues associated with the exploration and exploitation of archives. It was the fodder I needed for combining human stories about art and failure with the use of primary sources. I had a new assignment idea, where students could start to take pleasure in failure. An assignment where speculation and interrogation were as, if not more, important than reaching a goal or producing a “thing.” Where the journey of discovery could lead to the production of new ideas and knowledge.

I also revisited Anne West’s *Mapping the Intelligence of Artistic Work* and was struck by her observations on the goodness in unfinished potential. That failures can be unpacked, reworked, or refined in ways that finished work cannot. And, how reveling in play through collections and organizations of things could “expand our field of action, freeing ourselves from arbitrary restrictions.” It was timely, then, to be selected for the Archives’ two-part workshop on teaching with primary sources.

This is how “Failed It” became its own assignment embedded in several courses I teach, including *Playing with Pictures*. Here, failure would be a research wardrobe through which we could travel beyond Narnia. Students would learn that using primary sources is a dynamic, improvisatory process encased by failure, a “good” type of failure that helps us to relook and reread. That leads us to venture into black holes we didn’t know we wanted to explore.



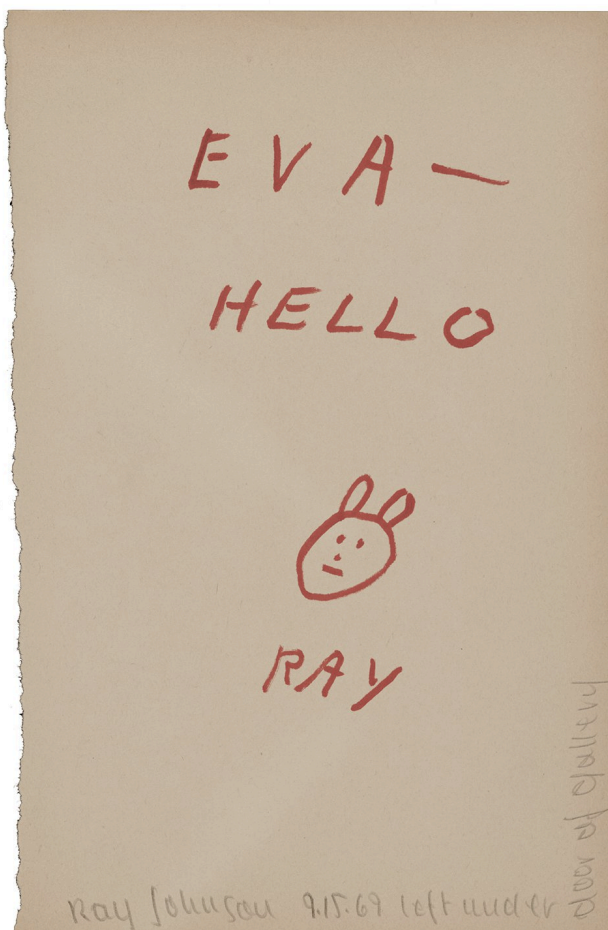
Chuck Rosenak. Coca-cola bottle sculpture by Howard Finster, not before 1996. Chuck and Jan Rosenak research material, circa 1938-2008. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Students locate a single work from the Archives’ digitized collections from which to build outward. In other words, they curate a new collection based on materials they select and source from the Archives. Students begin by making a list of topics they are obsessed with, frustrated by, or want to know more about. Then, they pick two to three favorites from the list and create more specificity around them. For example, if a favorite topic is *easels*, they might add *plein air painting* or *studio portraits*. From here students search the Archives for like (and unlike) items related to their lists, letting failure and surprise be part of the process. They make notes on their discoveries, what goes wrong, and any limitations. An advantage of this approach is the unearthing of something unexpected, which can change the course of the student’s initial research plans in exciting ways. But, they also realize that not every search query gives results that match their expectations. It can be

time-consuming to find something that piques their interest, even if the search terms seem relevant. Talking through these and other snags allows students to return to research with an open mind, to think creatively, and to engage in slow reading of the results alongside the visuals. Even a single word or phrase like “white wall” can lead to something wonderful, like a Coca-Cola bottle sculpture by Howard Finster.

Once they have identified a single work as the foundation piece, they present it to the class for group discussion and feedback. Then they proceed with adding pieces to it. Throughout, they keep notes on what they are trying to highlight or infer in their collection; what’s missing from it; and how someone else might use it.

Before giving an assignment, I like trying it out for myself. Currently I’m writing a ten-chapter novella about relationships between the letter X and photography. After online searching of the Archives using keywords (*cross, marks, alphabet*), I chose my foundation piece, a source photograph for Joan Semmel’s painting *Cross-over*. The pink tones in this work reminded me of Mark Rothko’s *Red on Pink on Pink* (1953), so I searched “Rothko cross.” One of the results was Gustave Harrow legal records relating to the Estate of Mark Rothko. This got me thinking about legal mysteries and art, and how the word “mystery” is often denoted by a letter X. I searched “mysterious pink” which led me to A variety of specimens of steatite from the Red Pipestone Quarry, after which I searched “x impression” which took me to Joseph Cornell’s silver foil carpet rubbings. Within a few weeks, I had a new gathering of materials that linked back to Semmel’s source photograph. I also saw ways in which archives organize relationships, imply authority, and reflect the technology of the time.



Ray Johnson. Ray Johnson note to Eva Lee, Great Neck, N.Y., 1969 September 15. Eva Lee Gallery records, 1921-1973. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

To date my students have created, through self-curation, an array of new visual relationships. For example, they have connected a handwritten note from Ray Johnson to Eva Lee with a color image of Dorothy Seckler in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Found associations between a list of items lost in a fire at Jasper Johns's house and studio and an album of pressed flowers that may have belonged to Louisa Powers. Considered the implications of juxtaposing a reproduction of a mural depicting a police officer beating a woman; a cabinet card of Hiram Powers death mask; and an illustrated letter with an image of the Virgin Mary painted in neon colors. The students are learning firsthand the benefits of being critical and uninhibited. We share insights about weak spots and gaps in the Archive, and how collections represent ideas of power and privilege. We discuss the types of images that cannot be located, and what pictures remain invisible despite living in a time of image glut and information excess. The net result is that students are building new and valuable "somethings" from pre-existing parts. They are amplifying their preferences and biases while experiencing the wonders and limitations of archives, while creating a new corpus of research from which they can draw for future projects.

There are lots of quotes about failure. One of my favorites is from Johnny Cash: "You build on failure. You use it as a stepping-stone." It is this nuanced thinking that is key to "Failed It." Appreciating how different meanings can flourish from different groupings of primary sources. The value of, and failures in, generating new connotations and inferences from different materials. How the context of an image or object changes depending on where you find it and where you move it to. And the fantastic finds through serendipitous searching. Good *Fs* worth their weight in failure.

This essay originally appeared on the Archives of American Art Blog and was supported by funding from the Dedalus Foundation.